

Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry

By: Mildred D. Taylor

When you read or listen to language, it is helpful to *visualize* what you are seeing. You are making a picture (or movie) in your head. Your picture has to have details – what, color, number, size, shape, where, motion, mood, texture, sound, when, background, perspective – in order to help you remember, interpret, and analyze what you read.

Use this copy to make your own notes about Cassie, what is happening around her, and how she and the people around her are feeling. You may add your notes in words or pictures. You may also add details to the pictures provided.



By the end of October the rain had come, falling heavily upon the six-inch layer of dust which had had its own way for more than two months. At first the rain had merely splotched the dust, which seemed to be rejoicing in its own resiliency and laughing at the heavy drops thudding against it; but eventually the dust was forced to surrender to the mastery of the rain and it churned into a fine red mud that oozed between our toes and slopped against our ankles as we marched miserably to and from school.

Notes:



To shield us from the rain, Mama issued us dried calfskins which we flung over our heads and shoulders like stiff cloaks. We were not very fond of the skins, for once they were wet they emitted a musty odor which seeped into our clothing and clung to our skins. We preferred to do without them; unfortunately, Mama cared very little about what we preferred.

Since we usually left for school after Mama, we solved this problem by dutifully cloaking ourselves with the skins before leaving home. As soon as we were beyond Big Ma's eagle eyes, we threw off the cloaks and depended upon the overhanging limbs of the forest trees to keep us dry. Once at school, we donned the cloaks again and marched into our respective classrooms properly attired.

Notes:



If we had been faced only with the prospect of the rain, soaking through our clothing each morning and evening, we could have more easily endured the journey between home and school. But as it was, we also had to worry about the Jefferson Davis school bus zooming from behind and splashing us with the murky waters of the road. Knowing that the bus driver liked to entertain his passengers by sending us slipping along the road to the almost inaccessible forest banks washed to a smooth baldness by the constant rains, we continuously looked over our shoulders when we were between the two crossroads so that we could reach the bank before the bus was upon us. But sometimes the rain pounded so heavily that it was all we could do to stay upright, and we did not look back as often nor listen as carefully as we should; we consequently found ourselves comical objects to cruel eyes that gave no thought to our misery.

Notes:



No one was more angered by this humiliation than Little Man. Although he had asked Mama after the first day of school why Jefferson Davis had two buses and Great Faith had none, he had never been totally satisfied by her answer. She had explained to him, as she had explained to Christopher-John the year before and to me two years before that, that the county did not provide buses for its black students. In fact, she said , the county provided very little and much of the money which supported the black schools came from the black churches. Great Faith Church just could not afford a bus, so therefore we had to walk.

Notes:



This information cut deeply into Little Man's brain, and each day when he found his clean clothes splashed red by the school bus, he became more and more embittered until finally one day he stomped angrily into the kitchen and exploded, "They done it again, Big Ma! Just look at my clothes!"

Big Ma clucked her tongue as she surveyed us. "Well, go on and get out of 'em, honey, and wash 'em out. All of y'all, get out of them clothes and dry yo'selves," she said, turning back to the huge iron-bellied stove to stir her stew.

"But, Big Ma, it ain't fair!" wailed Little Man. "It just ain't fair."

Stacey and Christopher-John left to change into their work clothes, but Little Man sat on the side bench looking totally dejected as he gazed at his pale-blue pants crusted with mud from the knees down. Although each night Big Ma prepared a pot of hot soapy water for him to wash out his clothing, each day he arrived home looking as if his pants had not been washed in more than a month.

Notes:



Big Ma was not one for coddling any of us, but now she turned from the stove and, wiping her hands on her long white apron, sat down on the bench and put her arm around Little Man. “Now, look here, baby, it ain’t the end of the world. Lord, child, don’t you know one day the sun’ll shine again and you won’t get muddy no more?”

“But, Big Ma,” Little Man protested, “ifn that ole bus driver would slow down, I wouldn’t get muddy!” Then he frowned deeply and added, “Or ifn we had a bus like theirs.”

Notes:



“Well, he don’t and you don’t,” Big Ma said, getting up. “So ain’t no use frettin’ ’bout it. One day you’ll have a plenty of clothes and maybe even a car of yo’ own to ride ’round in, so don’t you pay no mind to them ignorant white folks. You jus’ keep on studyin’ and get yo’self a good education and you’ll be all right. Now, go on and wash out yo’ clothes and hang ’em by the fire so’s I can iron ’em ’fore I go to bed.”

Turning, she spied me. “Cassie, what you want, girl? Go change into yo’ pants and hurry on back here so’s you can help me get this supper on the table time yo’ mama get home.”

Notes:

What do you picture for this scene? Think of the colors you see, the sounds your hear, the mood and feeling in the air. Who do you see, what do you see? What colors? How many? Where is the scene? What's in the background? What's happening? What's the movement? What time of day is it? What shapes do you see?

That night when I was snug in the deep feathery bed beside Big Ma, the tat-tat of the rain against the tin roof changed to a deafening roar that sounded as if thousands of giant rocks were being hurled against the earth. By morning the heavy rain had become a drizzle, but the earth was badly sodden from the night's downpour. High rivers of muddy water flowed in the deep gullies, and wide lakes shimmered on the roads.

As we set out for school the whiteness of the sun attempted to penetrate the storm clouds, but by the time we had turned north toward the second crossing it had given up, slinking meekly behind the blackening clouds. Soon the thunder rolled across the sky, and the rain fell like hail upon our bent heads.

Notes:

Sketch: who is in this scene? Where are they? What is in the background? What colors do you see?
What sounds do you hear? What is the movement?

“Ah, shoot! I sure am gettin’ tired of this mess,” complained T.J.

But no one else said a word. We were listening for the bus. Although we had left home earlier than usual to cover the northern road before the bus came, we were not overly confident that we would miss it, for we had tried this strategy before. Sometimes it worked; most times it didn’t. It was as if the bus were a living thing, plaguing and defeating us at every turn. We could not outwit it.

We plodded along feeling the cold mud against our feet, walking faster and faster to reach the crossroads. Then Christopher-John stopped. “Hey, y’all, I think I hear it,” he warned.

We looked around, but saw nothing.

“Ain’t nothin’ yet,” I said.

We walked on.

Notes:



Add details to the picture above to make it match the scene.

"Wait a minute," said Christopher-John, stopping a second time. "There it is again."

We turned but still there was nothing.

"Why don't you clean out your ears?" T.J. exclaimed.

"Wait," said Stacey, "I think I hear it too."

We hastened up the road to where the gully was narrower and we could easily swing up the bank into the forest.

Soon the purr of a motor came closer and Mr. Granger's sleek silver Packard eased into view. It was a grand car with chrome shining even in the rain, and the only one like it in the county, so it was said.

We groaned. "Jus' ole Harlan," said T.J. flippantly as the expensive car rounded a curve and disappeared, then he and Claude started down the bank.

Stacey stopped them. "Long as we're already up here, why don't we wait awhile," he suggested. "The bus oughta be here soon and it'll be harder to get up on the bank further down the road."

"Ah, man, that bus ain't comin' for a while yet," said T.J. "We left early this mornin', remember?"

Stacey looked to the south, thinking. Little Man, Christopher-John and I waited for his decision.

"Come on, man," T.J. persuaded. "Why stay up here waitin' for that devilish bus when we could be at school outa this mess?"

"Well . . ."

T.J. and Claude jumped from the bank. Then Stacey, frowning as if he were doing this against his better judgment, jumped down too. Little Man, Christopher-John, and I followed.

Notes:

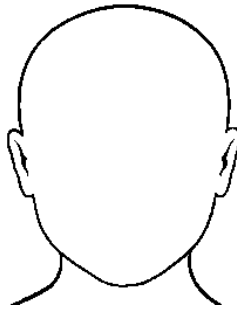


Five minutes later we were skidding like frightened puppies toward the bank again as the bus accelerated and barreled down the narrow rain-soaked road; but there was no place to which we could run, for Stacey had been right. Here the gullies were too wide, filled almost to overflowing, and there were no briars or bushes by which we could swing up onto the bank.

Finally, when the bus was less than fifty feet behind us, it veered dangerously close to the right edge of the road where we were running, forcing us to attempt the jump to the bank; but all of us fell short and landed in the slime of the gully.

Little Man, chest-deep in water, scooped up a handful of mud and in an uncontrollable rage scrambled up to the road and ran after the retreating bus. As moronic rolls of laughter and cries of “Nigger! Nigger! Mud eater!” wafted from the open windows, Little Man threw his mudball, missing the wheels by several feet. Then, totally dismayed by what had happened, he buried his face in his hands and cried.

Notes:



How is Stacey feeling? Draw his expression.

T.J. climbed from the gully grinning at Little Man, but Stacey, his face burning red beneath his dark skin, glared so fiercely at T.J. that he fell back. "Just one word outa you, T.J.," he said tightly. "Just one word."

Christopher-John and I looked at each other. We had never seen Stacey look like this, and neither had T.J.

"Hey, man, I ain't said nothin'! I'm jus' as burnt as you are."

Stacey glowered at T.J. a moment longer, then walked swiftly to Little Man and put his long arm around his shoulders, saying softly, "Come on, Man. It ain't gonna happen no more, least not for a long while. I promise you that."

Again, Christopher-John and I looked questioningly at each other, wondering how Stacey could make such a rash promise. Then, shrugging, we hurried after him.

Notes:



When Jeremy Simms spied us from his high perch on the forest path, he ran hastily down and joined us.

“Hey,” he said, his face lighting into a friendly grin. But no one spoke to him.

The smile faded and, noticing our mud-covered clothing, he asked, “Hey, St-Stacey, wh-what happened?”

Stacey turned, stared into his blue eyes and said coldly, “Why don’t you leave us alone? How come you always hanging ’round us anyway?”

Jeremy grew even more pale. “C-cause I just likes y’all,” he stammered. Then he whispered, “W-was it the bus again?”

No one answered him and he said no more. When we reached the crossroads, he looked hopefully at us as if we might relent and say good-bye. But we did not relent and as I glanced back at him standing alone in the middle of the crossing, he looked as if the world itself was slung around his neck. It was only then that I realized that Jeremy never rode the bus, no matter how bad the weather.

Notes:

Draw the details of the meeting: when, where, who.

As we crossed the school lawn, Stacey beckoned Christopher-John, Little Man, and me aside. "Look," he whispered, "meet me at the toolshed right at noon."

"Why?" we asked.

He eyed us conspiratorily. "I'll show y'all how we're gonna stop that bus from splashing us."

"How?" asked Little Man, eager for revenge.

"Don't have time to explain now. Just meet me. And be on time. It's gonna take us all lunch hour."

"Y-you mean we ain't gonna eat no lunch!" Christopher-John cried in dismay.

"You can miss lunch for one day," said Stacey, moving away. But Christopher-John looked sourly after him as if he greatly questioned the wisdom of a plan so drastic that it could exclude lunch.

"You gonna tell T.J. and Claude?" I asked.

Stacey shook his head. "T.J.'s my best friend, but he's got no stomach for this kinda thing. He talks too much, and we couldn't include Claude without T.J."

"Good," said Little Man.

Notes:

At noon, we met as planned and ducked into the unlocked toolshed where all the church and school garden tools were kept. Stacey studied the tools available while the rest of us watched. Then, grabbing the only shovels, he handed one to me, holding on to the other himself, and directed Little Man and Christopher-John to each take two buckets.

Stealthily emerging from the toolshed into the drizzle, we eased along the forest edge behind the class buildings to avoid being seen. Once on the road, Stacey began to run. "Come on, hurry," he ordered. "We ain't got much time."

"Where we going?" asked Christopher-John, still not quite adjusted to the prospect of missing lunch.

"Up to where that bus forced us off the road. Be careful now," he said to Christopher-John, already puffing to keep up.

When we reached the place where we had fallen into the gully, Stacey halted. "All right," he said, "start digging." Without another word, he put his bare foot upon the top edge of the shovel and sank it deep into the soft road. "Come on, come on," he ordered, glancing up at Christopher-John, Little Man and me, who were wondering whether he had finally gone mad.

Notes:



"Cassie, you start digging over there on that side of the road right across from me. That's right, don't get too near the edge. It's gotta look like it's been washed out. Christopher-John, you and Little Man start scooping out mud from the middle of the road. Quick now," he said, still digging as we began to carry out his commands. "We only got 'bout thirty minutes so's we can get back to school on time."

We asked no more questions. While Stacey and I shoveled ragged holes almost a yard wide and a foot deep toward each other, dumping the excess mud into the water-filled gullies, Little Man and Christopher-John scooped bucketfuls of the red earth from the road's center. And for once in his life, Little Man was happily oblivious to the mud spattering upon him.

When Stacey's and my holes merged into one big hole with Little Man's and Christopher-John's, Stacey and I threw down our shovels and grabbed the extra buckets. Then the four of us ran back and forth to the gullies, hastily filling the buckets with the murky water and dumping it into the hole.

Now understanding Stacey's plan, we worked wordlessly until the water lay at the same level as the road. Then Stacey waded into the gully water and pulled himself up onto the forest bank. Finding three rocks, he stacked them to identify the spot.

Notes:

"It might look different this afternoon," he explained, jumping down again.

Christopher-John looked up at the sky. "Looks like it's gonna rain real hard some more."

"Let's hope so," said Stacey. "The more rain, the better. That'll make it seem more likely that the road could've been washed away like that. It'll also keep cars and wagons away." He looked around, surveying the road. "And let's hope don't nothin' come along 'fore that bus. Let's go."

Quickly we gathered our buckets and shovels and hurried back to school. After returning the tools to the toolshed, we stopped at the well to wash the mud from our arms and feet, then rushed into our classes, hoping that the mud caked on our clothes would go unnoticed. As I slipped into my seat Miss Crocker looked at me oddly and shook her head, but when she did the same thing as Mary Lou and Alma sat down, I decided that my mud was no more noticeable than anyone else's.

Soon after I had settled down to the boredom of Miss Crocker, the rain began to pound down again, hammering with great intensity upon the tin roof. After school it was still raining as the boys and I, avoiding T.J. and Claude, rushed along the slippery road recklessly bypassing more cautious students.

"You think we'll get there in time to see, Stacey?" I asked.

"We should. They stay in school fifteen minutes longer than we do and it always takes them a few minutes to load up."

When we reached the crossing, we glanced toward Jefferson Davis. The buses were there but the students had not been dismissed. We hastened on.

Notes:



Expecting to see the yard-wide ditch we had dug at noon, we were not prepared for the twelve-foot lake which glimmered up at us.

"Holy smokes! What happened?" I exclaimed.

"The rain," said Stacey. "Quick, up on the bank." Eagerly, we settled onto the muddy forest floor and waited.

"Hey, Stacey," I said, "won't that big a puddle make that ole driver cautious?"

Stacey frowned, then said uncertainly, "I don't know. Hope not. There's big puddles down the road that ain't deep, just water heavy."

"If I was to be walking out there when the bus comes, that ole bus driver would be sure to speed up so's he could splash me," I suggested.

"Or maybe me," Little Man volunteered, ready to do anything for his revenge.

Stacey thought a moment, but decided against it. "Naw. It's better none of us be on the road when it happens. It might give 'em ideas."

"Stacey, what if they find out we done it?" asked Christopher-John nervously.

"Don't worry, they won't," assured Stacey.

"Hey, I think it's coming," whispered Little Man.

We flattened ourselves completely and peered through the low bushes.

Notes:



The bus rattled up the road, though not as quickly as we had hoped. It rolled cautiously through a wide puddle some twenty feet ahead; then, seeming to grow bolder as it approached our man-made lake, it speeded up, spraying the water in high sheets of backward waterfalls into the forest. We could hear the students squealing with delight. But instead of the graceful glide through the puddle that its occupants were expecting, the bus emitted a tremendous crack and careened drunkenly into our trap. For a moment it swayed and we held our breath, afraid that it would topple over. Then it sputtered a last murmuring protest and died, its left front wheel in our ditch, its right wheel in the gully, like a lopsided billy goat on its knees.

We covered our mouths and shook with silent laughter.

As the dismayed driver opened the rear emergency exit, the rain poured down upon him in sharp-needed darts. He stood in the doorway looking down with disbelief at his sunken charge; then, holding on to the bus, he poked one foot into the water until it was on solid ground before gingerly stepping down. He looked under the bus. He looked at the steaming hood. He looked at the water. Then he scratched his head and cursed.

Notes:



Add Mr. Grimes and the stranded students to the scene.

"How bad is it, Mr. Grimes?" a large, freckle-faced boy asked, pushing up one of the cracked windows and sticking out his head. "Can we push it out and fix it?"

"Push it out? Fix it?" the bus driver echoed angrily. "I got me a broken axle here an' a water-logged engine no doubt and no tellin' what-all else and you talkin' 'bout fixin' it! Y'all come on, get outa there! Y'all gonna have to walk home."

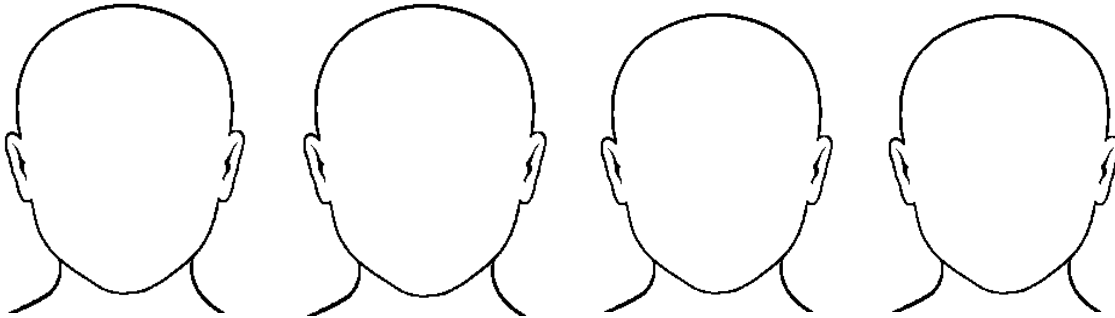
"Mister Grimes," a girl ventured, stepping hesitantly from the rear of the bus, "you gonna be able to pick us up in the mornin'?"

The bus driver stared at her in total disbelief. "Girl, all y'all gonna be walkin' for at least two weeks by the time we get this thing hauled outa here and up to Strawberry to get fixed. Now y'all get on home." He kicked a back tire, and added, "And get y'all's daddies to come on up here and give me a hand with this thing."

The students turned dismally from the bus. They didn't know how wide the hole actually was. Some of them took a wild guess and tried to jump it; but most of them miscalculated and fell in, to our everlasting delight. Others attempted to hop over the gullies to the forest to bypass the hole; however, we knew from much experience that they would not make it.

By the time most of the students managed to get to the other side of the ditch, their clothes were dripping with the weight of the muddy water. No longer laughing, they moved spiritlessly toward their homes while a disgruntled Mr. Grimes leaned moodily against the raised rear end of the bus.

Notes:



Now how do you think Stacey, Cassie, Christopher-John, and Little Man are feeling? Draw their expressions.

Oh, how sweet was well-maneuvered revenge!
With that thought in mind, we quietly eased away and
picked our way through the dense forest toward home.

Discuss. How would Big Ma and Mama react if they knew what the kids had done?
How would Papa react if he knew what the kids had done?
How would their teachers react?
How would the bus driver react?
How would the white students react?
How would the white people in the community react?

Notes:
